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# Which countries have had the most successful migration policies and why?

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It's remarkable how little research is available comparing the success of [different countries' immigration policies](#). This is partly because it is such a delicate topic, and partly because there are so many different criteria to judge what makes a successful policy. If the criterion is simply to keep people out, North Korea has the best policies. If it's to let the most people in, well, some countries in the poorer parts of Africa have no border controls at all!

Despite what some [tabloid newspapers might think](#), it is generally good news if you live in a place where immigrants keep turning up. Affluent countries that have attracted high numbers of immigrants tend to be socially successful countries. The best countries for immigration are not only welcoming to immigrants but are also worth staying in, in that they have affordable housing and transport, good public education and healthcare, and jobs that are well paid.

***"If you are an immigrant in a low-paid job such as washing dishes, you will be paid three times as much as somebody washing dishes in Britain. Even cleaners in Switzerland can earn the equivalent of €30 per hour."***

For large European countries, the most successful vis-à-vis immigration is Switzerland, where [25 percent of the population are immigrants](#). This is partly because it's a really strangely shaped country. The most elongated a country is, the more immigrants it will have because more people live right next to it and can easily move in. If Switzerland were a circular shape, its immigration rate would be lower.

However, the real secret of Switzerland's success is that it is very, very economically successful, which attracts migrants and creates work. It's also pretty equitable, which makes it a good place to be an immigrant. If you are an immigrant in a low-paid job such as washing dishes, you will be paid three times as much as somebody washing dishes in Britain. Even cleaners in Switzerland can earn the equivalent of €30 per hour.

Switzerland allows the free movement of Europeans and it occasionally worries about that, but mostly the people there don't complain about immigrants. Again, this is down to the low levels of economic inequality. If people are all being paid similar amounts of money, they don't resent incomers so much – just look at Iceland. Iceland was traditionally a slave society, in that Vikings brought Celtic slaves to the country, but now those two populations have completely integrated. Nobody in Iceland describes themselves as a Viking or a Celt!

That's another important measure of successful immigration – how immigrants have fitted in with locals. Historically there have been catastrophic mass immigrations in terms of their effect on the indigenous

population – look at America, where the Native Americans were largely wiped out by the germs of the immigrants, or Australia, where the Aborigines were treated incredibly badly. At least in New Zealand the white immigrants signed a treaty with the Maoris.

In the Americas the most successful country for immigration is Canada. It has been more welcoming to immigrants in recent years than has America because [Canadians are better at realising that immigrants are very innovative](#). They tend to have more get-up-and-go than most people and their children do better at school. In Germany, adult Syrians get exploited and do pretty poor jobs the Germans don't want to do but their kids do well in school and go on to achieve a lot.

The highest percentage of immigrants in the world is in Gulf states such as Qatar, but they are not examples of successful immigration because they are just cheap labour. Immigrants to the Middle East are given very few rights and mortality rates for foreign workers on construction sites are very high.

***"Occasionally far right parties will use immigration as a weapon to try to gain political support but across Europe in recent years support for far right parties has fallen."***

Occasionally far right parties will use immigration as a weapon to try to gain political support but across Europe in recent years support for far right parties has fallen. There are no far right parties worth talking about at all in Spain and Portugal, which is remarkable, as Spain has had huge amounts of immigrants from North Africa. The media make the far right problem sound far worse than it is. Nobody ever writes a story about support for the far right falling!

The immigration debate can be toxic because it is rooted in ideas about territory and tribe, about invaders coming in and taking over – 1066, and all that. Politicians tell people that problems are caused by invaders, but really there are no armies of invaders coming in. It is just people moving across the world, as we always have and we always will.

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It is extremely difficult to define "success" in the sphere of migration policy. It is also difficult to compare any one measure of success across various countries due to different modes of social organization and different migration histories across the globe. In my answer to this question, I will first review two basic policy approaches to migration, and then I will review one policy case that is currently regarded by social scientists as relatively successful - the case of Sweden.

**Assimilation and Multiculturalism**

Many social scientists today have come to an agreement that a central part of successful policy is something called integration of migrants in society. This word has a number of different definitions in different contexts, but for migration scholars this usually refers to the adaptation of migrants in their new society combined with the adaptation of society to incoming migrants. So integration is a complex two-way process. Its desired outcome is usually inscribed in policy as one of two things: (1) assimilation, or (2) multicultural society.

**Assimilation means that migrants give up their own patterns of social behaviour and take on the patterns prevalent in their new societies, so the result is a more homogenous society** (this policy is said to be followed

in France, for example). A **“multicultural society,” on the other hand, generally refers to the coexistence of different patterns of social and cultural behaviors within one society, resulting in a “patchwork” of diverse cultures side by side** (Canada and Australia have proclaimed this as their official approach to migrant integration). While some countries openly proclaim either assimilationism or multiculturalism as the main goal of their policies, in practice many fall somewhere in between, implementing some assimilationist policies, while also trying to be open to the prospect of a multicultural society.

So if assimilationist policies, broadly speaking, aim to make migrants “dissolve” socially and culturally in the societies they move to, then we would measure assimilation by how far migrants reflect the employment levels, education levels, income, and political behaviours of the receiving society. The problem with this approach is that the society of any country is incredibly complex, diverse, and varied, so it is unclear which groups in society the migrants should be “assimilating” into and which groups policymakers should be comparing migrants with. Assimilationism is also based on the underlying logic of a zero-sum game: the paradigm implies that if migrants do not assimilate, then other members of society somehow lose out. This assumes a fundamental conflict of interest between migrants’ interests and those of the rest of society. In my view, however, there is no empirically proven basis for this. Moreover, I do not believe that difference between people inherently leads to conflict.

If multiculturalist policies aim to provide an environment that is friendly towards the coexistence of various cultures that retain their specificities side by side, then measuring the success of multiculturalism would involve assessing levels of conflict between groups, attitudes towards difference in society, access of various groups to various services and opportunities for

development and growth, levels of political participation and representation at different levels of government.\* Multiculturalism has come to mean many things: a set of concrete policies that uphold a diverse society; a political-normative term that refers to the preference for diversity in society over homogeneity; and an analytical term sociologists use to describe the state of a given society. Below I will describe a country case where multiculturalism was embodied in a set of working migration policies.

One major study from 2011, conducted by the British Council and the independent European non-profit "Migration Policy Group," ranked 31 countries in Europe and North America on their migration policies using a variety of different criteria (employment opportunities, access to education and anti-discrimination legislation). Sweden ranked number 1, with Portugal, Canada, Finland, and the Netherlands following close behind. The bottom five were Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, Cyprus and Latvia. The UK came in at number 12, tying with Germany. The US ranked 9th. In more recent studies, Sweden has remained at the top of such rankings. For this reason, below I will consider the case of Sweden, a state that follows the multiculturalism paradigm.

### **The Case of Sweden**

In Sweden, about 15% of the population is foreign-born, and about 100,000 new migrants come to live there every year. Below I outline the main characteristics of Sweden's policy, based on information from the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX):

- **Data-driven policies:** Swedish integration policies are evidence-based and responsive to new data. Mainstream services, such as healthcare, are developed and continuously scrutinized to serve a diverse population. Working groups target "hard-to-reach groups" in society to make sure that these groups also have access to the same services as citizens.

- **Relatively easy family unification:** importantly, immigrant families face fewer obstacles in Sweden than in many other countries to reunite with family members. Policies allow family members of immigrants already residing in Sweden to join them and take up residence there.
- **Relatively easy, clear path to citizenship and acceptance of dual citizenship:** Sweden offers a clear path to citizenship: permanent residents are legally entitled to secure citizenship after 5 years of residence in Sweden, and those who obtain Swedish citizenship are allowed to keep their other citizenships as well.
- **Opportunities for political participation:** immigrants without citizenship can vote in local and regional elections and can form and join associations, political parties, media organizations. Civil society organizations work to inform immigrants of these rights and opportunities.
- **Access to healthcare:** healthcare entitlements are the same for Swedish citizens and immigrants.
- **Equality legislation that protects migrants from discrimination:** migrants in Sweden have better access than migrants in many other countries to the judicial system and to protection against discrimination. There are many laws and regulations in place in Sweden that forbid discrimination against people on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality. Victims seeking justice have relatively good access to mechanisms for enforcing these laws.
- **Inclusive schools:** While there is still room for improvement, Sweden boasts a relatively inclusive school system in which children of various backgrounds have the chance to be educated side by side. Sweden has also funded bilingual education and mother tongue instruction in schools to support the needs of children with various linguistic backgrounds, giving children opportunities to maintain and use their first language alongside Swedish.

- **Public opinion:** there is a general consensus among the public in Sweden that immigrants should benefit from the same rights as citizens.

Based on this information about Sweden and on other sociological studies about migrant integration, we can conclude that migrants “integrate” better in societies that have targeted employment policies for migrants and low employment discrimination. In addition, securing residence, securing family life, and granting citizenship help achieve better employment outcomes for migrants. Studies have also shown that children with a migration background succeed in school systems are inclusive and educational programs are targeted towards the needs of migrant students. Several studies also indicate that a clear path to citizenship is important for the success of migrants. Over the past two decades, elements of multiculturalist policies have been strengthening in Western European countries. Despite recent rhetoric about the “failure of multiculturalism,” we have not seen any actual significant retreat from multiculturalist policies in those countries where they have already been implemented.

As we can see from the discussion above, relative success of a migration policy is very contextual and depends largely on the paradigm a country follows with regard to its migrant population. Moreover, it is important to note that migration and integration policies today are mostly state-based, i.e. carried out by governments of nation-states. But the processes of migration and integration are very complex, multifaceted, as each migrant crosses many borders and lives across different societies, sometimes splitting time between countries or retaining very close ties with people across the globe. We also should not lose sight of the vast global inequalities that shape migration patterns, feed prejudice and racism, and result in the structural inequalities that migrants come into contact with when arriving in a new place of residence.

Moreover, even when we try to analyze what a successful migration policy could look like within nation-states, we should still try to stretch our imaginations and keep in mind the complex life stories and social structures that resulted in migrations across the globe, and by imagining these experiences we can envision a world where integration into a simplified and imagined “host” society is supplemented by networks of transnational solidarity across different societies and different social groups.

*\* To complicate things further, some migration scholars use the words “integration” and “multiculturalism” interchangeably (in which case the two policy outcomes would be either assimilation on one end of the spectrum, and integration on the other), but for our purposes in this answer we have viewed assimilationism and multiculturalism as two “ideal types” of policy sets, with a common goal of some form of migrant “integration.”*

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**DANNY DORLING INTERVIEWED BY IAN GITTINS**

## **What happens in societies where social mobility ends?**

You just have to look at a country with virtually no social mobility, and [a great example is Brazil](#). Most countries have had periods of relative equality and inequality, such as the dip in inequality that happened after World War II. Brazil hasn't. It has effectively had terrible inequality since it was colonized by Portugal in 1500.

*"Why should the elite welcome social mobility? People see it as a good thing because people from the bottom come up to the top – but it needs an equal number of people from the top to go down to the bottom."*

Brazil has an inherent belief in inequality amongst its elite. [Behind it is racism](#) – the elite tend to be lighter skinned, which dates back to slavery and seeing the indigenous people as inferior. The country has every kind of barrier to social mobility, and terrible exploitation. Even when people think they're moving upwards, they're usually being tricked.

One result is obviously extreme income inequality. Brazil has low tax and investment in [public services](#), with all that that entails. A very common sight in Rio is huge billboards advertising plastic surgery for the rich, and homeless people sleeping beneath them. Crime is rife and the rich have a vast number of gates and metal bars around their homes.

It's terrible, but there is passive support from America for this way of carrying on. America criticises Cuba endlessly but it never criticises Brazil. Well, Brazil is what Cuba would have been if they hadn't had Castro's revolution.

Across the world, there is a very high correlation between low social mobility and high income inequality. The simple reason is that when you have [high income inequality](#), the affluent try very hard to get their children into the top 10% of earners because the consequences of not doing so are so bad. In Brazil, the publicly funded universities accept mostly rich kids and the very few poor kids who go have to pay high fees to go to private universities, which is shocking.

Yet why should the elite welcome social mobility? People talk of it as a good thing because they like people from the bottom coming up to the top, but they rarely realise that it needs an equal number of people from the top to go down to the bottom. They also don't realise the idea of social mobility is cherished in [unequal countries](#) as an excuse for inequality. People say it's OK to be unequal as long as we give people at the bottom a chance of getting to the top, whereas what we actually need is a society where the level of social mobility doesn't matter so much because the gap between the top and the bottom is relatively small.

I have a daughter. In a more equal, normal European country than [Britain](#), if she said she wanted to be a nurse, I wouldn't have to worry that she would never be able to buy a house and would be paying rent for the rest of her life. You don't just get more social mobility in more equal countries – you also don't worry about it so much.

One problem about social immobility is that [it creates more social immobility](#). If society is effectively segregated, people mix far less, so few people marry outside of their social class. This squares the inequality, because a household where two people are lowly paid is much poorer on aggregate than a household where both partners are well paid.

In [a very unequal society](#) such as Britain, anybody who does marry into a better off family is inevitably viewed as a gold digger. Even then, the rich party will want a pre-nup agreement, which is designed to prevent any equalisation of

wealth in the event of a divorce. Socially mobile countries don't need pre-nups.

The best way to increase social mobility would be to have fewer jobs at the bottom of society. Currently we have a government who are obsessed with [the employment rate](#) and who feel that the more people they can get into work, the better. This has resulted in a huge increase in awful [low-paid jobs](#) that are not really needed: call centres, and people cycling around delivering pizzas because it is so cheap that people can't be bothered to go and fetch their own pizzas. In more equal, socially mobile countries, you don't see people doing those jobs. It's almost invented labour.

[A hard Brexit](#) could make our social immobility even worse. If Britain leaves Europe completely, our ability to shelter the world's tax havens – a lot of which are in Crown territories – and allow London to turn into a tax haven would increase. Right now, we are teetering between two options: 'Do we want to become more equal, or shall we be that country again which has lots of servants but at least has some trickle-down from the super-rich?'

We started off here talking about South America, and one consequence of social mobility coming to an end has historically been a revolution. Revolution has never really been the British way, but when people realise that their children's future is likely to be worse than their own, they react in unusual ways. [Just look at Brexit!](#) In a way, that's what Brexit is – a British revolution.

# How unequal is Britain in 2016, historically speaking?

It's terribly unequal. Britain is by far the most unequal country in Europe – in fact, only America rivals us in the entire world – and right now, in times of [income inequality](#), we are back to the levels of some time in the early 1930s. In terms of wealth inequality, we are actually more unequal than that now.

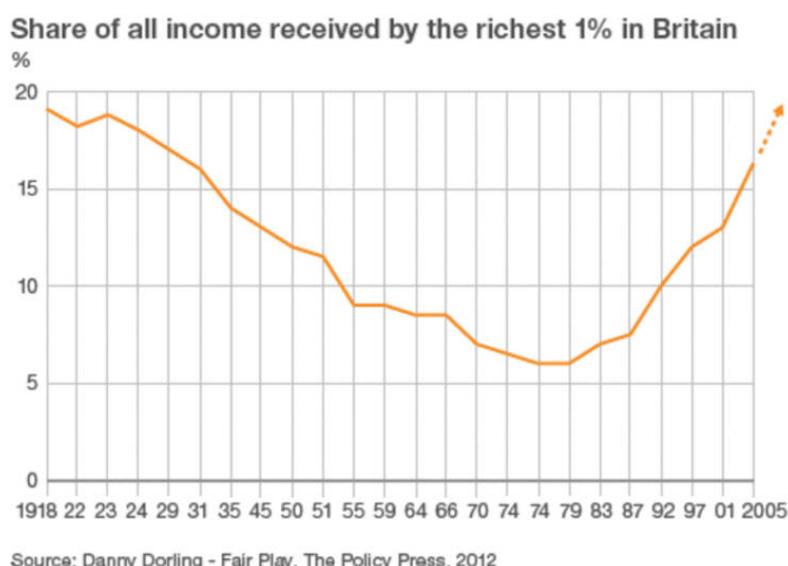
It really is quite a statistic. It means that Britain in the 21st century has the same level of inequality that it did in an era when the main working-class jobs for men were in the mines and agricultural labour, and for women was being a servant. We are as unequal as a period of servants, of top hats, and of people wearing different clothes according to their social class. The difference is that by the 1930s, wealth inequality was reducing. That's not the case right now.



- ***Welcome back to pre-war Britain: “We are as unequal as a period of servants, of top hats, and of people wearing different clothes according to their social class. But in the 1930s, wealth inequality was reducing. It’s not now.”***

Historically, the height of inequality in the UK to date was in 1913, just before the First World War. Before the war, there was a belief in Britain that the people at the top of society deserved to be there, and deserved to have servants, and deserved what they had, because they were different. After the war, there was a change in the national mood to “Normal people deserve a decent life” and “It is wrong to be greedy”.

So, inequality fell dramatically from the First World War all the way to the late 1970s. It didn’t really matter which of the two political parties was in power. Lloyd George helped things along, as did the formation of trade unions and a new Labour Party. Inequality was already falling when Labour came to power in 1945 and it continued to do so during their period in charge.



However, inequality also fell during the thirteen years of Tory rule from 1951-64. The Harold Macmillan government built a lot of council housing. It continued to decrease under Harold Wilson in the 1960s and it also fell under Edward Heath. The main reason was that from 1913 right through to the late 1970s, both political parties were moving to the left at every election.

This came to a juddering halt with Margaret Thatcher. She reversed the national sentiment of “It’s wrong to be greedy” and introduced the idea that “Tall flowers should be allowed to bloom” and “If somebody has a lot of money, it’s because they’ve worked hard for it.” Unsurprisingly, [inequality rose rapidly](#) under Thatcher, all through the 1980s, although it flattened out a little under John Major.



***Harry Enfield’s Loadsamoney: Thatcherism reversed Britain’s dislike of greed (for some).***

It also rose under [New Labour and Tony Blair](#). When they came in, salaries in the finance industry were going up and up, while a “normal” job for a working-class person was no longer a relatively well-paid manufacturing job but working in a shop, on a minimum wage. We also had a New Labour government who not only didn’t really want to talk about redistribution, but had come to believe in the trickle-down theory. Blair talked a lot about “equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome” but that really translated to saying “I don’t care if inequality is rife.”

***“The inescapable truth is that from 1979 onwards, our two main political parties reversed the trend of the previous 60 years or more and moved judderingly to the right.”***

That was partly why, right up until the financial crash of 2008, you saw images of bankers partying in London and buying bottles of Champagne for £40,000. That idea, that if you have a lot of money you flaunt it, has ended now. There are still more than 2,000 bankers earning over €1m a year, but they see ordinary people demanding that [Philip Green](#) bails out the BHS pension scheme and they keep as quiet as they can about their money.

Despite this, inequality picked up again when the Cameron and Clegg coalition government came in. The inescapable truth is that from 1979 onwards, our two main political parties reversed the trend of the previous 60 years or more and moved judderingly to the right. We are completely out of step with the rest of Europe – and Brexit can only make that worse.

When it comes to tackling inequality, Angela Merkel may be seen as a right-wing German leader, but she is more to the left than New Labour ever was. Jeremy Corbyn isn't just a standard issue 1970s or 1980s Labour politician: he's an absolutely standard mainstream European politician today. In a way, we only see him as strange because we have become so strange.

Will inequality in Britain improve in the near future? So much depends on what kind of Brexit we do. Unfortunately, what often happens in Britain since the 1970s is that when the country becomes poorer, the well-off decide to abandon yet more of the rest of society.

***“I’m optimistic that equality will start to get better soon. It has even started hitting the top 10% of earners who go to elite universities and get well-paid jobs in London, who still can’t afford to buy homes.”***

The irony is that solving inequality could be terribly easy. All you need to do is take a little bit more from the people right at the top, a tiny amount of their income, and you can double the income of the people at the bottom without the people at the top even noticing it. The reason that Philip Hammond doesn't hire 2,000 more tax inspectors and start doing this is that the people the government would be targeting would be, well, themselves and their friends. Just look at the job that Theresa May's husband does [*Philip May is a senior executive at an investment fund company that profits from tax avoiding companies*].

Even so, I'm cautiously optimistic that equality will start to get better soon. It has to. The problem is now so bad that it has even started hitting the top 10% of earners – there are people who go to private schools and elite universities and get well-paid jobs in London who still can't afford to buy homes. These are natural Conservative supporters, and their plight is triggering a survival instinct in the Conservative Party that if it loses people like that, it is in trouble. It will have to do something about inequality if it is to survive – and, for better or worse, the Conservative Party has always been very good at surviving.

## **Will anything short of global revolution end the dominance of the 1%?**

Well, the 1% is really a very British and American phenomenon.

The UK and US are by far the most unequal of the 25 richest countries in the world. Only [Israel](#) and [Singapore](#) come anywhere near our levels. The UK has greater economic inequality than Israel – and the Israel figures include everybody in the Gaza Strip. That shows just how divided Britain is. Broadly speaking, the [1% is anybody who earns £150,000 per year or more](#), or £200,000 for couples.

Its make up is very varied. They're not all millionaires or multimillionaires but the [majority of them work in finance](#). Only around 3% of the 1% are celebrities, or sports stars like footballers. The 1% currently earn about 12% of all income in the UK. That is the highest level in Europe.

In [Switzerland](#), their 1% take half as much as our 1%. In France, the amount of money that their 1% don't take, compared with our 1%, could fund an entire new national health service. The main reason that people at the top in the UK are taking so much is [the cost of housing](#). It's not that we don't have enough housing: we have more bedrooms per person than ever. Our economic inequality means that we are doing all kinds of things really ineffectively: the 1% have several homes, while junior doctors are going on strike because in London and the South East they can't even afford a bedroom.

It's very plausible to argue that our very unequal society is a legacy of having had an [empire](#), unlike the rest of Europe. That empire earned us money and when it ended, inequality began to rise in the UK because the wealthy in the south east of England didn't want their living standards to fall, and so voted for the living standards of everybody else to fall.

In the UK, the dominance of the 1% peaked around 1913. It started to fall after the [First World War](#) because taxes were needed to pay for the war and the only people who had any money were the rich. In fact, losing a war is a very good way of securing more equal societies. The invading force takes wealth away from the aristocracy because they don't want

another war. Japan was so worried about a possible revolution after the [Second World War](#) that it actually handed out land to people in 1946 and 1947 to make a more equal society.

Owen Jones says there are fewer people in the whole of Japan earning €1m a year or more than there are in the [Canary Wharf HQ of Barclays Bank](#). Of course, it is misleading to focus solely on the 1%. Below them the 2% and the 3% are also taking too much. The top 10% in the UK take 28% of all income, which, again, is by far the highest in Europe. But the 1% take nearly half of it. So, how do we end the dominance of the 1%? Well, it is far easier to tackle income than it is to tackle wealth, because the 1% can squirrel their money away in tax havens. If you sort out income inequality, then wealth inequality will get better. That has happened in places such as [Denmark](#).

The best answer is property taxation. The wealthy can hide their money but it is very hard to hide a house. Ed Miliband was on to this before the 2015 election but made the stupid mistake of calling it the [Mansion Tax](#). He should just have called it fairer property taxation and people may have got behind it. Financial crashes also hit the 1%. If, or when, there is a property crash in London, people won't feel good about it but it will result in increasing equality.

In a lot of countries there is a slow and steady improvement in reducing inequality. It is only the UK and the US that are outliers. I think the fact that the two most economically unequal countries in the rich world have both recently behaved very strangely electorally – [Brexit](#), and [Trump](#) – is

down more to the inequality in those countries than anything else.

There is some evidence that the wealthiest are beginning to reduce their take in the UK. In 2012, the 1% were taking 15% of all income: now, it is down to 12%. But this is a little dubious because a lot of it was down to tax avoidance and people paying their tax early to avoid Gordon Brown's [50p top rate](#). Mostly, my optimism that the 1%'s dominance will reduce is down to the fact that we just can't go on like this. When you are the most unequal country in Europe, and are the most unequal you have been for a century, something has to give.

The people right at the top are becoming a little bit fearful about what's going to happen to them. I think they are right to. One last thought – I used to worry that Britain was the only country in the world with no nice members of the 1%. Even America had [Warren Buffett](#), but we seemed to have nobody. So thank heavens for [Gary Lineker](#) and [JK Rowling](#).

Online references to the additional short interviews: Dorling, D. (2016) Will anything short of global revolution end the dominance of the 1%? Interview on 'The Question', November 28th, <http://theqstn.com/questions/188615/will-anything-short-of-global-revolution-end-the-dominance-of-the-1>; Dorling, D. (2016) How unequal is Britain in 2016, historically speaking? Interview on 'The Question', December 6th, <http://theqstn.com/questions/191201/how-unequal-is-britain-in-2016-historically-speaking>; Dorling, D. (2016) What happens in societies where social mobility ends? Interview on 'The Question', December 12th, <http://theqstn.com/questions/193358/what-happens-in-societies-where-social-mobility-ends>